

## Panama names Noriega 'conductor of new republic'

by Carlos Wesley

General Manuel Noriega was declared the "conductor of the process of national liberation" and coordinator of the "new republic" on Oct. 11 by Panama's National Assembly of Representatives. Noriega's largely symbolic appointment by the 510 representatives, also known as the Assembly of People's Power, took place on the 21st anniversary of the nationalist revolution led by his mentor and predecessor as commander of Panama's Defense Forces (PDF), Gen. Omar Torrijos. The move took place as the Panamanian government continued to consolidate a nationalist resistance front in the wake of the failed U.S. effort to kidnap or assassinate Noriega on Oct. 3.

Noriega told the assembly that Panama's 2 million inhabitants are waging a war of liberation, "and I want to tell you that we have to be prepared, because they cannot catch us again by surprise: even if this commander falls, this people will never fall." In the event he fell, he said, "the people must take to the streets and seize all defense installations so that the government does not fall."

### A return to Torrijos

The meeting of Panama's Assembly of Representatives was the first in seven years. Created by the late Omar Torrijos, the Assembly of "Corregimientos" system not only served as a legislative body providing the widest democratic participation at the level of the smallest community unit, the "corregimiento," similar to a U.S. county, but each representative was also given a budget to meet the necessities and improvements of his area.

But the representatives' power to undertake community projects was curtailed and their legislative function abolished under the constitutional reforms instituted in 1982 by Henry Kissinger's protégé, Gen. Rubén Paredes. Instead of the

community representation of the "corregimiento" system, Paredes's reforms established that representation would be for political parties.

Paredes, who preceded Noriega as commander of Panama's armed forces, was the one who cut the deals with the Medellín cocaine cartel, allowing them to get a foothold in Panama. Under an arrangement blessed by Kissinger, Paredes was supposed to become President of Panama in 1982, but General Noriega said no, and took steps against the cocaine trafficking apparatus allied with Paredes.

As U.S. Deputy Secretary of State (and former president of Kissinger Associates, Inc.) Lawrence Eagleburger admitted on Aug. 31, it was this move by Noriega against Paredes and his drug allies that caused the U.S. to launch its campaign to oust Noriega.

The restoration of the system established by Torrijos, Noriega told the representatives, "is true democracy, where each man represents his community and each is judged by his own neighbors." Speaking about the emergency war measures, including the firing of public employees engaged in sedition, Noriega explained that the laws "are in no way a call for the establishment of execution squads. . . . They are laws to maintain order at a time . . . when Panama, in truth, finds itself the victim of war, a psychological war, a shooting war, an economic war, a diplomatic war." Noriega said the only ones who have reason to fear the new laws are the local oligarchs in the U.S.-financed opposition, "who tremble everytime the people organize themselves."

Noriega warned the rest of Ibero-America that he is not the only target of the U.S. "This fight," he said, "is because they want the geographic space of the Republic of Panama to carry out aggression against other nations and to establish control over the geopolitics of Latin America."

In his address to the Assembly, Panama's provisional President Francisco Rodríguez said that his nation was defending itself "from a powerful and merciless adversary that is pursuing great strategic objectives at the expense of destroying Panama's sovereignty and independence." This was a reference to the power-sharing condominium arrangements between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

The President said that his government has embarked on a national project "that goes beyond merely resisting aggression," and takes into account "the framework of the continental economic crisis." Rodríguez said that "unlike what happens in other countries, where the people are burdened by the concessions granted to foreign creditors, this provisional government is proposing a legislative package to defend national sovereignty and take care of the people's needs."

The economic measures proposed by the Panamanian President are intended to insure a secure income for all workers, and "at the same time to preserve the existent infrastructure, which is in danger of deterioration, and to provide investments for new public works that have been postponed because of lack of resources."

### **Dealing with the fallout**

While the Panamanian government was preparing its defenses, the Bush White House was still trying to deal with the fallout from the coup fiasco. On Oct. 13, President Bush held a surprise news conference, and charged that those who are saying that he failed to provide enough support to the Panamanian plotters are "instant hawks appearing from where there used to be feathers of a dove." While he does advocate the use of force "in a prudent manner" against Noriega, Bush said, "I think this rather sophisticated argument that if you say you'd like to see Noriega out, that implies a blanket, open carte blanche on the use of American military force . . . to me that's a stupid argument that some erudite people make."

Bush explained that he limited the U.S. military deployment in support of the plotters because otherwise there would have been an engagement with PDF units leading to heavy losses of American lives. "I have at stake the lives of American kids and I am not going to easily thrust them into a battle unless I feel comfortable with it and unless those general officers in whom I have total confidence, feel comfortable." The White House announced that new guidelines are being issued to the U.S. military in Panama so that they can react more quickly in the event of another coup.

At the same time there were almost daily revelations about U.S. involvement in the coup, which Mr. Bush at first tried to pretend the U.S. was not involved in, when he said on Oct. 3, "the U.S. has nothing to do with this." The latest revelation came from Noriega, who charged that the U.S. did not just lend support to a plot initiated by the rebels, but that it was the originator of the conspiracy. "The U.S. was involved before, during, and after the coup," he said in an

interview published by the *Washington Post* Oct. 13. "They had to make the contacts, woo them, convince them," he said. He added that investigators had found that the U.S. gave at least \$1 million to one of the plotters, Captain Erick Murrillo. White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater denied the charges.

The administration has set itself up for yet another potential catastrophe by giving the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) authorization to apprehend fugitives of U.S. law in foreign countries, and to return them to the U.S. without first obtaining the the foreign state's consent, according to leaks in the *Los Angeles Times* which the administration admitted to on Oct. 13. This fascist "snatch authority," enacted in unusual secrecy by the Justice Department, is aimed at kidnaping Noriega, whom the U.S. falsely accuses of being a drug trafficker. Commenting on this blatant violation of international law and the sovereign rights of nations, a Middle Eastern diplomat told Reuters news agency on Oct. 13, "What would you say if the KGB for example, sought to take all their fugitives from the United States?"

In an interview published by Mexico's *Excelsior* on Oct. 5, Noriega dismissed the U.S. charges that he is involved in drug trafficking. "If I had agreed to accept their orders, to give them back the canal, to extend for another 99 years the presence in Panama of the U.S. military Southern Command, would I be their number 1 enemy, the devil, the drug trafficker? Or would I be the United States' favorite democrat?"

### **Ibero-America says no**

In yet another setback to U.S. efforts to topple Noriega, the Presidents of the Ibero-American Group of 8 nations, meeting in Ica, Peru, refused on Oct. 12 to grant the demand of U.S. anti-Noriega ally, Venezuelan social democratic President Carlos Andrés Pérez—who participated in the failed U.S. plot—to expel Panama from the organization, because of alleged human rights abuses. Although the leaders did agree to continue Panama's suspension from the group, its expulsion was rejected because, as Argentina's President Carlos Menem said, "Panama's problems are an internal affair to be solved by Panamanians."

Pérez, whose own human rights record includes the killing under his government of hundreds of Venezuelan citizens last February for protesting economic austerity, was so thoroughly repudiated in his anti-Panama stance by his colleagues, that even Peruvian President Alan García sought to distance himself from the Venezuelan. Having initially backed Pérez's call to expel Panama, an embarrassed García tried to deny that Panama's expulsion had even been discussed. "No people or country can be expelled, because that can offend the citizenry," he said. Pressed by reporters, García finally admitted that the expulsion was proposed, "but I cannot recall by whom." Later he recovered his memory, but said he was "not going to be disloyal and say who proposed it. I prefer to forget who made the proposal."